

Mar 18

Five Questions to Ask After Tillerson's Departure

nick romanow

Rex Tillerson may have set a record for creating the most gossip about getting fired without actually being fired. However, after 405 days in office, President Trump has finally decided to oust the former Exxon executive in favor of standing CIA Director Mike Pompeo. The circumstances and timing of the firing are peculiar to say the least. With the White House resorting to its typical minimalist approach to public relations, here are five questions I'm asking:

1. What happened?

The timing of this firing was anything but convenient. Tillerson was touring Africa for most of last week and earlier this week. His trip was not a routine diplomatic tour, however. He skipped engagements last Saturday in Kenya citing "illness" and returned to the U.S. a day early when he flew home Monday night. This turmoil was an early signal that something was not quite right. In addition, the State Department released a statement by Tillerson on Monday that condemned Russia for its alleged nerve agent attacks against former Russian spies living in the United Kingdom. Could Tillerson's Tuesday departure from the State Department be a retaliation for the hardline language against Russia?

2. Why now?

Tillerson to be the “worst Secretary of State ever.” It is hard to cite any significant achievements, besides speculation on how Tillerson may have been a check on Trump’s rashness. For all Trump’s rhetoric on attacking North Korea, there has been relatively little progress until last week's revelation that the President will meet with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un. America's top diplomat is also preoccupied with last week's steel tariffs announcement, ongoing NAFTA negotiations, and uncertainty over the nuclear agreement with Iran. With so many ongoing dilemmas, there must be a larger reason for firing Tillerson at this critical moment in Trump's tenure.

3. So what?

Donald Trump's response to reporters this morning in the wake of the firing shed a little more light as to why Tillerson was replaced. The president mentioned differences over the Iran deal, among other things, for why the two could no longer work together. If the popular narrative of Tillerson as a guard-rail for Trump's foreign policy holds any weight, then moderation in foreign policy may soon be harder to find.

4. Now what?

CIA Director Mike Pompeo will now replace Secretary Tillerson and potentially turn a new page for the United States Department of State. So far in the term, the State Department has been understaffed and underfunded. It is not clear whether or not Pompeo will allow this to continue. However, the CIA certainly did not face a significant lack of resources, and it wouldn't make sense for the new Secretary to suddenly be willing to work with far less. Pompeo is a West Point graduate, former businessman, and three-term congressman from Kansas. Besides his short tenure at the helm of the CIA, Pompeo lacks significant foreign policy experience and is known for his hawkish views on Iran and North Korea.

5. What's next?

The leadership turnover in the executive branch is staggering, and there's no reason to believe that stability is on the way. Trump's removal of a figure known to be a moderating voice in the Situation Room may signal the President’s desire to pursue more aggressive strategies. Nominating a military figure to run the nation's diplomatic operations arguably reinforces a move towards a more jingoistic foreign policy. Tariffs against allies, talks with North Korea, as well as unforeseen situations sure to emerge in the close future all point toward another tumultuous chapter in American foreign relations.



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